

North Korea

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Freedom of the Press

North Korea remained the most repressive media environment in the world in 2013, as its new leader Kim Jong-un tried to solidify his grip on power. The one-party regime owns all domestic news outlets, attempts to regulate all communication, and rigorously limits the ability of the North Korean people to access outside information. Although the constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of speech, provisions calling for adherence to a “collective spirit” restrict in practice all reporting that is not sanctioned by the government. All domestic journalists are members of the ruling party, and all media outlets serve as mouthpieces for the regime. The North Korean media have continued their propaganda efforts to consolidate national unity around Kim Jong-un, who assumed the country’s leadership after the death of his father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011. In particular, there was extensive and heavily controlled local media coverage of the December 2013 execution for treason of Kim Jong-un’s uncle, Jang Song-thaek, and several other top former officials associated with Jang.

Under the penal code, listening to unauthorized foreign broadcasts and possessing dissident publications are considered “crimes against the state” that carry serious punishments, including hard labor, prison sentences, and the death penalty. North Koreans have been arrested for possessing or watching television programs acquired on the black market. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been an increase in the flow of news and information into the country via foreign radio stations and nongovernmental organizations that send multimedia content across the border. For example, several Seoul-based radio stations run mainly by North Korean refugees—such as Free North Korea Radio, Radio Free Chosun, and North Korean Reform Radio—have broadcast to the population in North Korea since the mid-2000s. According to surveys of North Korean defectors by the North Korean Human Rights Database Center, an increasing number of North Koreans have listened to foreign radio in recent years. With the growing popularity of DVD players in the country, smuggled foreign DVDs have become an important source for information about life outside North Korea. Although televisions are required to be fixed to official channels, nearly one-third of the population—mainly those living along the Chinese and South Korean borders—reported accessing foreign television broadcasts, according to a May 2012 report by InterMedia.

In 2007, a Japanese journalist and several North Korean refugees launched *Rimjingang*, the first newsmagazine to be based on independent reporting from inside the country. The reporting is conducted by specially trained North Koreans—most of them refugees along the border with China—who have agreed to go back into the country and operate as undercover journalists using hidden cameras. A number of other news outlets based outside the country, including *Daily NK*, also provide reporting about North Korea and rely to some extent on sources based inside the country. Although reports from these outlets are easily accessible for people outside North Korea, within the country most citizens still rely primarily on state-owned broadcasting agencies for news.

Official North Korean media portray dissidents and foreign journalists as liars attempting to destabilize the government. Authorities allow very few foreign journalists to report in the country and curtail their ability to gather information by preventing them from talking to people on the street and constantly monitoring their movements. The regime does on occasion invite the foreign press, both individually and as a group, to cover festivals, parades, or other events that shed a favorable light on the state.

State-owned outlets dominate the media landscape. They include the Korea Central News Agency

(KCNA); *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of the ruling Workers' Party; the party's Korean Central TV; and, on the radio, the Korean Central Broadcasting Station. In a recent opening for Western media, North Korea agreed to allow the Associated Press (AP) to establish its first full-time and all-format news bureau in the country. The AP bureau, located inside the headquarters of the KCNA in Pyongyang, officially opened in January 2012 after weeks of delay following the death of Kim Jong-il. Although the AP had maintained a video bureau in North Korea since 2006, the new full-time news bureau allowed its photographers and journalists to work in the country on a regular basis, albeit under heavy restrictions.

There are no accurate statistics measuring the rate of internet penetration in the country. However, the online presence of North Korean official media has increased in recent years. *Rodong Sinmun* launched a new website in February 2011, while the KCNA website has improved since debuting in 2010. The website of the Korean Friendship Association, a major channel for promoting propaganda abroad, offers multimedia content, including videos. North Korea maintains YouTube and Twitter accounts under the name Uriminzokkiri (Our Nation). Beginning in February 2013, North Korea allowed foreigners visiting or living in the country access to the internet from their mobile devices via a 3G network run by its Koryolink. Reporters for the AP and China's Xinhua news agency in North Korea were some of the first foreigners to use the service. The decision regarding the mobile internet service came shortly after North Korea began allowing foreigners to bring their own cellphones into the country to use with Koryolink SIM cards. These new connections, however, have little significance for most North Korean citizens. Global internet access is still restricted to a handful of high-level officials who have received state approval, though increasing numbers of academic scientists and students are also permitted limited internet access. Ordinary citizens are granted access only to a national intranet that does not link to foreign sites. The Korea Computer Center, a government information-technology research center, controls the information that can be downloaded from the intranet. As personal computers are highly uncommon in homes, most access occurs via terminals in libraries or offices. However, the use of USB flash drives smuggled from China has improved the flow of outside information into North Korea.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

97

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

30

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

38

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

29

